DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 180 812 HE 012 163

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TITLE Film and Values in the Liberal Arts Curriculum.
PUB DATE May 79
NOTE 14p.: Paper presented at the Medgar Evers College (CUNY) Faculty Development Workshop (New York, NY, May 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Beliefs: *College Curriculum: Critical Thinking: Decision Making: Film Criticism: *Films: Higher Education: Humanistic Education: Human Living: Individual Development: *Liberal Arts: Problem Solving: *Self Concept: Student Attitudes: *Student Development: *Values

ABSTRACT

The role of values clarification and self-concept development, which are important issues in liberal and humane education, are identified, and it is suggested that the use of film in a class can emphasize values processing and clarification. Film is a medium that can clearly illustrate conflicts and problems in human relationships and the complex problems of choice and consequence in human affairs. Cinematic exposure to personal experience that might not otherwise be encountered may enhance value clarification. Examining the choices and both positive and negative consequences portrayed in human situations by films may guide a student in the process of choosing values and in understanding the probable consequences attendant on any choice. The area of values and beliefs are viewed as important to intellectual changes that are possible for students to attain. Since students will be faced with many value choices in their lives, the ability to think, choose, evaluate, and act is crucially important. A part of successful learning and growth is linked to attitude and beliefs about the self, and value confusion and negative self-concept can lead to inappropriate choices and an ignorance of potential consequences. Two films that are pertinent to values clarification, Elia Kazan's "A Face in the Crowd" and Sembene Ousmene's "Mandabi," are discussed. (SW)

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Film and Values in the Liberal Arts Curriculum

by

Lawrence S. Abbott

Paper presented at the Medgar Evers College
(CUNY) Faculty Development Workshop, May, 1979

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When we say that we want to teach the Liberal Arts, or more specifically the Humanities subjects, which have traditionally been the core and focus of liberal learning (although the Liberal Arts rightly encompass the Sciences and Social Sciences), what precisely is it that we wish to accomplish? We have some rather well thought-out, if not shop-worn, notions on what the Liberal Arts are and their value in the curriculum. Most, if not all, of us are products, to varying degrees, of liberal learning, and so are exemplars of this type of education. And what qualities do we see in ourselves that we wish to transmit to our students? Broad-mindedness, freedom from prejudice, breadth of acquaintance with "the best that has been thought and written," a heightened sense of our humanness. Most importantly, though, we have, or think we have, the ability to see value in our beliefs, ourselves, and, in keeping with the spirit of Faulkner's Nobel Prize acceptance speech, the whole of the human enterprise.

I had the good fortune not too long ago to talk with an engineer. What would be to me an ordinary run-of-the-mill building, was to him an assemblage and dynamic coordination of joints, angles, and stress points. As I listened to him talk I began to see that the human assemblage is made up of psychic joints and stress points, each one unique in its own particular arrangement. The study of literature, in fact the study of all the arts, is an attempt to help us perceive the true sources of these human stresses and junctures.

We in the Humanities disciplines especially place a high premium on values,

beliefs, and the growth of the mind through exposure to the arts. If the stress points and junctures of the dynamic human self can be revealed, we will have gone a long way toward self-discovery and change. The underlying motivation, I believe, of our teaching is that we wish to be instruments of our students' metanoia, or change of spirit.

This growth of the mind we talk about is another way of saying that we want our students to value, for we believe that valuing, which is inextricably linked to self-concept, is a process open to manipulation by us as teachers. We can and should, and this is the real theme of my essay, promote at every opportunity in the classroom our students' self-concept and attitude. We can no longer "tack on" subject matter and leave the affective domain uncultivated. We should not go under the assumption that the subject matter in itself guarantees the metanoia we seek.

William Purkey, in Self-Concept and School Achievement, writes of the reciprocal effect of unhealthy self-concept on academic success, in which ability is less of a factor than the student's perception of his ability and his attitude toward himself. Many of our students react tropistically and appear to be locked in a cycle of failure. Most believe that this academic failure is a product of feelings of worthlessness, powerlessness, and the inability to feel control over the forces affecting one's life. This is a part of what Raths, Harmin, and Simon term "value confusion." This comes about when the student feels that he has no value (worthless), or when he rationalizes failure by reducing the importance of academic work (it doesn't mean anything, so it doesn't matter that I failed at it), or when his perception of something is at odds with a more accepted pattern of behavior (it is all right for me to cheat on exams).

We are involved in the rather difficult domain of the affective processes, difficult because it has no clear-cut measurement, is cumulative, and because the forces feeding into self-concept are varied and circuitous. There is rarely a definite area of right and wrong. Yet cognitive growth has been shown over and over to be linked with the affective domain. How can we seriously expect intellectual changes in our students when we neglect the arena of values and beliefs?

I want to return a bit to explore further our responsibility to values education and the related enhancement of our students' self-concept. As I mentioned earlier, valuing is a process; it is the individual's excursion on a journey of sorting out, giving meaning, categorizing, and finally clarifying. We may not be able to teach specific values, although I think that there <u>are</u> some values universally beneficial to human and humane living. We are able, however, to teach value clarity and guide our students to a position of conscious and informed choice of values and to a recognition of the consequences attendant on any choice. In a society of abused ethics, where noble words mask evil deeds, we have no alternative but to attune our students to the "process of valuing." Dewey's words still ring true when he writes that values are generated out of the interaction of man with his environment; they include both the world of objects and the world of other men. Values arise out of man's ongoing concerns and activities.

In <u>Values and Teaching</u>, Raths, Harmin, and Simon write:

> We therefore cannot be certain what values, what style of life, would be suitable for any person. We do, however, have some ideas about what <u>processes</u> might be most effective for obtaining values. These ideas grow out of the assumption that whatever values one obtains should work effectively as possible to relate one to his world in a satisfying and intelligent way.

Their notion builds directly on that of Dewey, for whom action, behavior, not thought, was the true test of value. In fact, Dewey's "values in action" correspond to Raths, Harmin, and Simon, who formulate a three-tiered scale of valuing, from choosing, to prizing, to acting. We want our students to live by the values implicit in the Liberal Arts, which are at base a commitment to the human enterprise and to what Emerson called Man Thinking. In this sense values education--process and clarification--is of the utmost practicality. The Liberal Arts are not first a subject matter, but a way of acting and believing, a way which leads to self-reliance and self-growth after the student leaves the institution. I think that Daniel Bell said it best in his The Reforming of General Education (1966) when he noted that truly liberating liberal education "must concentrate upon teaching modes of conceptualization, explanation, and verification which are generalizable beyond specific areas of study." For it is out of the academic setting, in the so-called "real world," where the individual will have to call upon not only his subject matter knowledge, but more crucially his ability to think, choose, evaluate, and act. He will be faced with an immense number of value choices and the student will have to make these choices and recognize consequences.

Our job as educators, as I see it, is to teach the subject matter in the service of value clarification and self-concept development. These areas should be an integral part of our classroom activities, and as I will show can be the whole of the classroom endeavor. The fact of the matter is that regardless of how we want to avoid facing the situation, the domain of values, beliefs, and self-concept impact on every other area of human development. Successful learning is not so much a matter of ability, although this is of

course a factor, but of attitude and beliefs about the self. Value confusion and negative self-concept--leading to inappropriate choices and an ignorance of potential consequences--precludes success in the classroom.

Choices and consequences are of critical importance for the teacher, because choices emerge from one's value system. George Kneller put it well in Existentialism and Education: "The teacher must bring the student to realize the implications of his decisions. The student must not be shielded from the consequences of his actions. Nor must he blame his weaknesses or mistakes on the infirmity of his environment, on his family, on bad advice, or on human nature." If values change, choices change, and consequences therefore change. Raths, Harmin, and Simon point out that "values must grow from thoughtful, prized choices made from sufficient alternatives." Our main purpose as humanist educators is to help students see possible (and probable) consequences of a choice and find out if they are willing to accept the consequences which may follow.

This is actually the essence of moral philosophy, for as Nowell-Smith writes in his book, Ethics: "The most a moral philosopher can do is to paint a picture of various types of life in the manner of Plato and ask which type of life you really want to lead." The job of the humanist educator, like Joseph Conrad's as a novelist, is "to make you see," see the consequences of actions and therefore make choices which bring about desired results.

Now, this is all well and good in terms of theory, but how can film be translated to classroom practice? What can films do to enhance a student's values clarification and in turn self-concept? First, film is a transparent medium, in that it often bares more clearly than other media what it is about. Films can clearly illustrate conflicts and problems in human relationships, the complex problems of choice and consequence in human affairs, which we want our students to experience. I believe that cinematic exposure to ways of being and personal experience which they might not otherwise have encountered can enhance value clarification. If we want to facilitate our students' searches for an understanding of their humanity, for dignity and self-respect, and if we want to sharpen their sensitivity to the "stuff and substance of consciousness," as Joseph Church calls it, then film can act as this change agent.

Films can present human situations in which choices are made and from which consequences result. An examination of the choices and consequences, both positive and negative, can guide a student in the process of choosing values and can guide him to an understanding of the probable consequences attendant on any choice. In many cases the expedient choice is made with no real thought given to possible results; films can present models of existence in the same way that literature presents the "real world" in symbolic ways.

How can films be used to realize this noble goal of true humanist education? How can films be used as a tool of personal evaluation and as an instrument of what Maxine Greene calls "wide-awakeness"? Let me recall for you a scene in Hamlet; it occurs when Hamlet has the traveling

players enact a little production of "The Murder of Gonzago" with the hope of revealing Claudius' past actions and his culpability. As the play-within-the-play unfolds Hamlet watches Claudius to witness that shock of recognition which is the emblem of his guilt. And as Hamlet watches, Claudius does indeed reveal a guilty conscience--brought on by the action of "The Murder of Gonzago."

This image I take to be similar to what films can do in the arena of values and the complex interweaving of motivation, action, and result. Just as Claudius began to reflect on his past actions, so too do we want our students to reflect on their values, motivations, and actions, and to consider the possibilities of consequence. Film can be a primary mechanism in this endeavor. As Dewey said, reflective thinking is required to come to terms with personal values, and as Paul W. Taylor has written, "it would be more important that people be able to give good reasons for their values than that they should accept a particular set of values."

What film can do is to hold a mirror up to the self and to society. We wish our students to integrate new ways of thinking and to bring these new ways of thinking to bear on behavior. This is, as I mentioned earlier, metanoia, change of spirit, and is what I take to be our main purpose as humanist educators.

That this is not some eccentric vision of educational and personal transformation through film can be seen in the words of the late Italian film

director Roberto Rossellini. He called for, in his recent book Un Esprit Libre (published before he died), the pursuit of an "integral education" in which modern man would be freed from the destructive effects of specialization, fragmentation, which he termed another form of ignorance. "We are neither ants, nor bees, nor spiders, and yet we have become regimented, stereotyped." He was especially impatient with education which has the effect of "fixing and maintaining" what is already established in society. He also distrusted educational methods that stuff brains with facts while suffocating all interest in the complex whys and ways of the world. The kind of values clarification using film I am talking about is consonant with what Rossellini articulates in his book. Values education seeks to increase one's synthetic intelligence and to develop self-realization..

Let me briefly illustrate what I have been discussing by looking at two films which are pertinent to values clarification. The first is an American film and the second is from Senegal.

Elia Kazan's A Face in the Crowd (1957) stars Andy Griffith as "Lonesome" Rhodes, a two-bit con man, hustler, and smooth-talker who spends most of his time in county jails. As a radio show gimmick, a reporter, played by Patricia Neal, goes into a jail and broadcasts Rhodes' "act." She gets him a job in radio, and then TV with a show called "Lonesome Rhodes Crackerbarrel." This is a kind of just-plain-folks talk show where Rhodes presents his populist philosophy, and he succeeds in achieving a Carson-like 51.7 share of the audience. From this peak of audience control he takes on the running of a senator's campaign for President, using the TV show for campaigning. However,

Rhodes' contempt for his audience is revealed when Neal turns a microphone on when he thinks it is off, thus delivering his real views of his audience to the home screen. His particularly frightening fall to delusion and self-destruction is quite vividly depicted. The final scenes of Rhodes giving a demonic sppech to an empty room, with an aide turning an applause machine on and off, is a chilling image of isolation and the consequences of exploiting people and misusing their trust for personal gain.

The film is actually a study of values and the destructive consequences of certain choices. Rhodes started out genuine enough, sympathetic, a populist. At one point he brings a black woman on his show and leads an appeal for contributions to rebuild her burned-down home. Another character says that "that takes real nerve. After all, this is Memphis." And it is 1957. But his unchecked drive for power over the masses for whom he has contempt is his undoing. His gradual self-consumption cuts him off from people and the world. He lost perspective on his behavior and had no understanding of the consequences of his actions. The age-old question--what does it mean to gain the world but lose your soul--is enacted in A Face in the Crowd. I suggest that films like this, which present human situations with human value problems, can be used in a classroom to guide students to make informed and intelligent choices about their lives. Raths, Harmin, and Simon, in discussing processes for obtaining values, say "that whatever values one obtains should work as effectively as possible to relate one to his world in a satisfying and intelligent way." Choices have value ramifications.

Another interesting film in this context is Mandabi, by Sembene Ousmene. Shot in Dakar and released in 1970, the film deals with the larger conflicts when an old tradition is being supplanted by a new one, and the resulting disturbances on one individual, Ibrahim Dieng. In addition to being a largely humorous account of Dieng's conflicts with new social mores, the film depicts the greater choices which a culture somehow makes and which have radical impacts on that culture's members.

To quickly summarize the film, Dieng receives a mandabi, or money-order, from one of his nephews in Paris. He cannot cashit because he does not have an I.D. card; at the police station he is told that he cannot get a card without a birth certificate; at City Hall he is told that he cannot get a birth certificate without a photograph. Thoroughly dismayed at this point, Dieng goes to another nephew in Dakar and receives a check in exchange for the money-order, but to cash it he has to bribe a bank teller with most of the check. He takes the rest of the money to a photographer, who keeps the money on deposit but then absconds with it. The nephew finally does cash the uncle's money-order, but says he was robbed of the cash after he left the bank--however, he pocketed the money himself. And Dieng is left with nothing: no money, no I.D., no photo, and no birth certificate.

Now what strikes me about the film is the character's encounter and conflict with a changing social outlook and the resultant change of the "old ways" of simplicity, trust, and what the Greeks called paideia, or a shared community of mutual trust, traditions, and values. (Incidentally, Varro and Cicero

translated the concept of paideia as Humanitas, and we are the modern inheritors of this.) The character in the film is forced to re-assess his place in the social order and recast his relation to the past and to the present. Dieng must clarify his values in order to "relate . . . to his world in a satisfying and intelligent way." His re-assessment may lead to rejection of the new society, or to an acceptance of it, but the point is that he must clarify and choose. At the end of the film he is not the same man as he was in the beginning. He has had to think in new ways.

Like another Sembene film, Emitai, which is also about the conflict of two cultures and value systems and the subsequent impact in individual consciousness, Mandabi enacts that principle of Dewey of man in active relation to society; further, the film comments critically on the nature of the two value systems.

To paraphrase a Robert Frost poem, I hope that I have been neither out too far nor in too deep. I have identified what I take to be important issues in liberal and humane education--the role of values clarification and self-concept development--and I have suggested that the use of film in a class emphasizing values processing and clarification would be a salutary move and would come close to the ideal of Liberal Arts education.

I'm not sure that any value system can resolve the multitude of paradoxes and conflicts we encounter daily in ourselves and in society, but at minimum the Humanities ideal is to create Man Thinking, and, to emend Emerson's term, Woman Thinking. The Humanities thinker must be able to understand

the nature of the problems we continually face and to clarify the ways in which these problems impinge on our lives. Solutions, however tentative, come out of thought and action, but the real beneficiary of change will be the individual who can participate in the Humanities ideal of self-knowledge and the pursuit of human excellence, which is the pursuit for goodness. Paul W. Taylor's remark is appropriate:

> The Socratic quest is a lifetime's endeavor, and each individual's pursuit of the quest is merely part of a task for humanity. The quest is a search for wisdom, and the final goal is knowledge of the good.